‘It’s really a fantastic time to be vegan’

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As glaciers shrink and forest fires grow, the fact that a Beyond Meat burger produces 90 per cent fewer greenhouse gas emissions than a quarter pound of beef is, for many, a compelling reason to eat less meat.

Personal health may also convince Jews who suffer from gastrointestinal problems to make the switch. Tracey Brown, a 48-year-old mother of two in the Toronto area, switched to veganism three years ago, after decades of being unable to figure out why she “felt so crappy all the time.” She had been tested for Crohn’s, colitis and other common digestive problems, but every specialist and doctor simply prescribed pills and steroids, instead of trying to find a proactive solution.

“They really don’t push that in the medical community,” she says. “Nobody said ‘eat plants.’ ”


When it comes to children, their diets rely on fewer daily calories, which means they need to be deliberately packed with a variety of essential nutrients. That leads some nutritionists who encourage plant-based eating, such as Dr. Rena Mendelson, a professor of nutrition at Ryerson University, to caution against a blindly vegan diet for everyone.

“It can’t be just, ‘I’m not eating this anymore’ – it has to be what you are eating,” she says. Some vegans erroneously believe they’ll get healthier by eliminating meat from their diet, even if they’re still eating junk food every night. “It’s a matter of making really calculated dietary sources and planning a diet that’s got a range of nutrients,” she says.

A vegan diet is known to cause deficiencies of vitamins A and B12, iron and omega-3 fatty acids. For anyone hoping to lose weight, Mendelson points to Canada’s current food guide as a better reference point: make half your plate fruits and vegetables, a quarter protein (plant- or animal-based) and a quarter whole grains.

“You want a diet that’s satisfying – not only physiologically, but also socially and emotionally,” she says.

For observant Jews, there is another reason to go vegan: it simplifies a kosher diet.

That was the entry point for Rabbi Robyn Fryer Bodzin, the new associate rabbi at the Beth Tzedek synagogue in Toronto. In 2011, during the hectic High Holiday season, when she was living in a place with a small kitchen in New York, she and her husband found they didn’t have time to cleanse their kitchen after big meals, in order to switch from meat to milk dishes.

“So we just ate out of our meat dishes for basically six weeks,” she says. By the end, “my husband and I just felt disgusting.” They made a pact to go vegan until American Thanksgiving, which was six weeks away. “All of a sudden, I felt better,” she says. “My body didn’t make noises … my skin looked better, I had more energy.”

Rabbi Fryer Bodzin sees nothing in Jewish texts that demands carnivorism. In fact, she points to Torah passages such as Deuteronomy 20:19, which command environmental responsibility. She summarizes the passage: “If there’s a war, don’t destroy the trees, because what did the trees ever do to you?”

To her, caring for animals is a Jewish value. “There’s no need for us to eat these animals,” she says. “Just because we are supposed to heal the world and be master of the world does not mean we have to eat the world.”

The hurdles for her adopting a plant-based diet are more cultural, rather than religious. “The only obstacle I’ve had to overcome is my family thinking I’m weird,” she says. For Passover, she used to place one of her kid’s plastic toy eggs on the Seder plate. These days, she uses “a beautiful picture of an egg.”

Dozens of rabbis agree with her interpretation of Jewish values. In September 2018, an international association called Jewish Veg published a letter signed by more than 70 rabbis urging Jews to go vegan.

“Judaism’s way of life, its dietary practices, are designed to ennoble the human spirit,” Rabbi David Rosen, the former chief rabbi of Ireland, wrote in the widely distributed letter. “It is therefore a contradiction in terms to claim that products that come through a process that involves inordinate cruelty and barbarity toward animal life can truly be considered kosher in our world.”

A growing number of Orthodox Jews are agreeing, especially in Israel, where veganism has created an unlikely alliance between secular Tel Aviv hipsters and socially conservative Jerusalemites.

Rabbi Asa Keisar is the vegan Orthodox movement’s leading figure, a militant and convincing speaker who blends biblical and talmudic citations into a 60-page booklet that he freely hands out at synagogues and yeshivas.

A sleek video recording of one of his Hebrew-language speeches, in which he spends 10 minutes outlining the religious argument against eating meat (“We’re transgressing the commandment against cruelty to animals,” he says), has racked up more than two million views on YouTube. The interpretation is pedantically complex, but the gist is simple: veganism is all but commanded by the Torah.

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Veganism is strongly rooted in Jewish texts and cruelty to animals is strictly forbidden in the Torah. These texts and the Jewish learning predates the State of Israel and the Palestinian conflict by thousands of years.

Whatever their reasons for going vegan, everyone interviewed for this story agreed that between Internet recipes, popular substitutions and meatless burgers, eating purely plant-based is easier than ever.

“It’s really a fantastic time to be vegan,” Karmazyn says. Jews might worry about the High Holidays, she notes, but a little creativity solves every problem. To break the Yom Kippur fast, try bagels with cashew cheese. For Rosh Hashanah, dip apples in date syrup. For Passover, you could follow Karmazyn’s lead: mash an avocado and spread it on a slice of matzah.

“It’s like Jewish avocado toast,” she says with a laugh.